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"E. A."—A MILESTONE FOR AMERICA

BY PERCY MACKAYE

THEY do it another way, there—over there in the leisured isles where the beauty of English was born. There the imagemakers of our speech are more than isolated singers, hermits of unfocussed populations, hurried out of knowledge of one another and their goal in common; there, rather, they are neighbors in a timeless community of craftsmanship, where masters and apprentices are nudgingly conversant with one another's work, its motives and methods—conversant to the keen point of conversation, roaring hot or cooled in reminiscence, not seldom sly or malicious, yet always spoken, as it were, by the family fire-side, on the flickering verge of which the General Public takes seat in the circle as a sort of poor relation.

So it has been, over there, time out of mind.

Such like talk there was at the Mermaid, about which far-distant poor relations are still gossiping in print. So the pens of a Boswell and a Lamb converse, rather than write, of poets who, by that token, are still living personalities. So Yeats, writing in our day, conveys—as by a rhythmic speaking aloud—the depth and charm of his friend and countryman, "A. E."

No such intimate home-circle tradition exists for us in America, where the critic as neighbor and fellow-craftsman is overlorded by the critic as reporter and advertiser. Perhaps a million miles of metal wire somehow account for it. Perhaps, as our conversation has become largely telephonic, so our nutrition in literature grows accordingly Literary-Digestive, and our perspective of criticism takes its range from summits of the Weekly Supplements.

"And why have you come to our country?" asked the reporter of Cardinal Mercier at the dock. "I have come in hopes to know America better, especially of course the work of your sculptors and painters and poets."

"Ah, my dear Sir!" exclaimed Blasco Ibañez to another astounded reporter, "ever since my arrival on your shores I have been searching everywhere for them!—Where are they?" "Where are *what*, Señor Ibañez?" "Why, your statues of Edgar Allan Poe. And that immortal house—I have waited all my life to enter its door!" "But what house, Señor?" "The little house where he lived and wrote *The Raven*."

Another little house in the village of Head Tide, Maine; who, I wonder, has been searching lately for that? Who has been knocking at the door, on a night before the eve of this Christmas Eve, and asking: "Is it here he was born, fifty years ago?" "Here—was *who* born?" "Our poet, yours and mine—Edwin Arlington Robinson."

Fifty years! It's an honorable milestone you are passing now, "E. A.", on your footpath way to a gate of golden quiet. And in spite of a sad heart in some of your songs, it's merrily you may "hent the stile-al" now that you have blazed through old bogs a trail so firm and beautiful behind you, with so many spry fellows now trying to catch up and keep step with you on the high pastures.

Fifty years! If this page were a fireside on a frosty hill in New Hampshire, and you were wearing your red jacket in a warm corner there, I would daunt your quizzing smile and continue this "aside" in conversation; but it is not to be done that way, so I'm told, in a printed article; and this is an article about you and your birthday, "E. A.", but—besides that—it is about a milestone for America.

The reader, then, of this, who possibly may not know already the works of E. A. Robinson, I would refer first to those works themselves, in his published volumes: *The Children of the Night*, *Captain Craig*, *The Town Down the River*, *The Man Against the Sky*, *Merlin*, and to separate poems published in "The Lyric," "Contemporary Verse," "Poetry," and many other magazines.

To these should be added the brilliant study of the man and his work in Miss Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, wherein Miss Lowell has accomplished an unprecedented task of trail-blazing for our country to-day, revealing—through her own deft and eager powers—the fellow-craftsman as critic of six contemporaneous American poets and their meaning to our time. There, in the frontispiece, under a white, soft hat, one may look

behind glasses in to the alert probity of E. A.'s eyes, and read there a quintessence of his works.

For myself, in this article, I cannot attempt to convey the gist of those works, nor critically to estimate their author's scope and standing. I am not able to do so adequately. During a brief hour of too busy days, I can merely pause in a little space of quiet to hail a fellow worker and old friend of many years at a half-century moment of high honor to himself, to suggest its high import to us, his countrymen.

And so at the beginning I have written those two Elusive Assonants—as one might begin a valentine with “Ever Admirable”—by which perhaps he is best endeared to those who know him best: “E. A.”

For I think history will record that no mortal tongue ever tried to name him “Edwin,” but whose tale left off abruptly—like the unfinished *Mystery of Drood*; nor ever, in his presence, uttered “Arlington,” but was struck instantly dumb as the buried heroes of Bull Run; and so he is to the world simply “Robinson,” to his friends—more Masonically—“E. A.,” and therefore ere long likewise to the World, who is fast becoming his friend.

In Ireland those letters, altered in sequence, are already endeared to the countrymen of “E. A.”; their poet mystic, communal in his spirit; in America they bespeak another, our own poet, touched also deeply with mysticism, but as utterly and differently individual in his spirit as the inverted initials suggest, or as “E. A.'s” New England is distinct from “A. E.'s” Ireland. Yet in their common mysticism inheres a kind of love for their fellow men which links their initials by more than fancied coincidence—by the peculiar affection of their readers and disciples.

Half a century appears a tall sign post to those near the quarter mark; in “E. A.'s” case, the sign points backward to more than a quarter century of published work as a poet, and forward—by token of that work—to the assured regard of the centuries.

Probably no other American has been more continuously and solely the poet-craftsman than he; for the few years he spent in the New York Custom House, to which Roosevelt as President appointed him from an incongruous job in the Subway, or such other years as he has followed other transient means of livelihood in the city toward more

tranquil latter-day seasons of creative work in the MacDowell woods at Peterborough, New Hampshire, these years have never swerved for an instant his dedicated patience to mature the art all his own, enlarging it steadily under the concentrated industry of vision.

Other American poets may have a longer record of sporadic achievement; none other has his distinctive continuity. Others have produced more abundance of good and bad; none other has reached his excelling ratio of good. Others may have blazed forth more patriotic or cosmopolitan; none other has ever gleamed more pure with the fine gold of America, nor revealed a soul more nakedly New England even when most universal in its vesture.

That New England, from which only New Englanders know how to rebel, that native mysticism renounced to which the renouncer deviously is drawn to return, that bone of bleak Maine, soul-sinew of New Hampshire, marrow of atavistic Massachusetts—those inbreedings of every artist born painfully from the stark Pilgrim Rock, are inescapably (say what he will himself) birthmarks of every image wrought by "E. A.'s" Muse; and they take on most in sorrow their distinctive beauty, in pain, contours of grandeur, even in madness, afterglows of a magic splendor, like that with which he describes his imagined Shakespeare in Ben Jonson's soliloquy:

And if he live, there'll be a sunset spell
Thrown over him as over a glassed lake
That yesterday was all a black wild water.

Yet I would not suggest that these New England traits are confined only to the grim or grand in his mood; often they spring up as plain and homely as mullein or plantain in a dooryard; or tansy-fragrant with a whimsical humor, like the line of a sonnet he wrote to my little daughter, of whose "all-inquiring eyes" he queries:

Am I a Boojum, or just—company?

And though all who know him know well his Mainewoods hark-back to a reclusive shyness, to a gait by his lonesome and a long stage-wait before joining a crowd as big as a baker's dozen, yet there is none can exhale his real self with more relish than "E. A." in a little group of his liking; and these latter days such groups have widened, since others I like also to recall, lang syne, when with Moody and Torrence we made four about a table for two, and Apollo stand-

ing by for a fifth, with spaghetti and cheese and Chianti from Seventh Avenue. And still in Cambridge, on a silver cup of Josephine Peabody Marks', that little group attests itself in the initials: W. V. M., R. T., E. A. R., P. M.

Among his works, nowhere is his pervasive New Englandism more redolent than in the poem "Isaac and Archibald," wherein he recalls his comradeship, as a boy of twelve, with two old Yankee farmers nearing their end. For a searching kindness and sheer poetry of characterization, for a stealing sense of landscape lit with the year's sundown—reviving from my own childhood the country season of cider in cellared barrels, where in

A fluted antique water-glass
There was a cricket of the brown soft sort
That feeds on darkness,

for an aroma of life which never palls in rereading, for me there is no poem more satisfying than this in the world:

Never shall I forget, long as I live,
The quaint thin crack in Archibald's old voice,
The lonely twinkle in his little eyes,
Or the way it made me feel to be with him.
I know I lay and looked for a long time
Down through the orchard and across the road,
Across the river and the sun-scorched hills
That ceased in a blue forest, where the world
Ceased with it. Now and then my fancy caught
A flying glimpse of a good life beyond—
Something of ships and sunlight, streets and singing,
Troy falling, and the ages coming back,
And ages coming forward: Archibald
And Isaac were good fellows in old clothes
And Agamemnon was a friend of mine;
Ulysses coming home again to shoot
With bows and feathered arrows made another,
And all was as it should be. I was young.

Since then, beyond that "blue forest where the world ceased," "E. A." has gone forth through the years to grapple with the "good life beyond," to play his own good part in "the ages coming back and the ages coming forward," till now the stature of his New England birthright is itself a measure of America and our time. At the "old clothes" of both he may often have tossed his clinging burrs of irony, but never at Agamemnon and Ulysses looming behind them; for, besides, as he says of old Isaac and Archibald in conclusion:

I knew them and I may have laughed at them;
 But there 's a laughter that has honor in it,
 And I have no regret for light words now.
 Rather I think sometimes they may have made
 Their sport of me;—but they would not do that,
 They were too old for that. They were old men,
 And I may laugh at them because I knew them.

And so in America and our time he knows and reveals
 behind old clothes old wisdom of the ages, even while he
 flings his "Cassandra" shafts at their commercial hypo-
 crises and flamboyant patriotisms:

Your Dollar Dove and Eagle make
 A Trinity that even you
 Rate higher than you rate yourselves;
 It pays, it flatters, and it's new.

And though your very flesh and blood
 Be what your Eagle eats and drinks,
 You'll praise him for the best of birds,
 Not knowing what the Eagle thinks.

The power is yours, but not the sight;
 You see not upon what you tread;
 You have the ages for your guide,
 But not the wisdom to be led.

Is not here, then, a portent for our time—a milestone
 for America?

When millions are blind to the forecasts of old Troy
 falling newly in their midst, shall not some of us who have
 long known among us a poet of probity, a seer of quiet per-
 spective over art and time, an artist who paints the forum
 without mounting it, a dreamer who leavens the crowd but
 shuns it, shall not we—without dragging him to a front
 window to withstand our plaudits—still hail him on his
 anniversary for what he is:

"E. A."—an American of reality, who has wrought an
 untainted vision with unfaltering patience; a leader who,
 without touching the ship's wheel, has guided pilots
 darkling; a lover of his fellows who, unseeking, has been
 sought by them for ungrudged bread of kindness; a maker
 of viewless images, who more than any other American
 poet living has aided to build anew the speech of Milton
 and Emerson as a tower of light to the commonwealth; a
 cloistral publican and ballad-singer who, moving unadver-
 tised among dumb crowds, has still drawn to his clear mur-

mured visions such a young-hearted band of fellow-creators as shall soon make all Americans proudly aware how they are living in an era when a new Acropolis is rising out of the wreckage of late fearful years—not over there in the old world, but here in our own.

And so for us Americans the token of this fiftieth birthday of "E. A." is more than a milestone for his individual progress: "E. A." himself is a milestone for America.

PERCY MACKAYE.